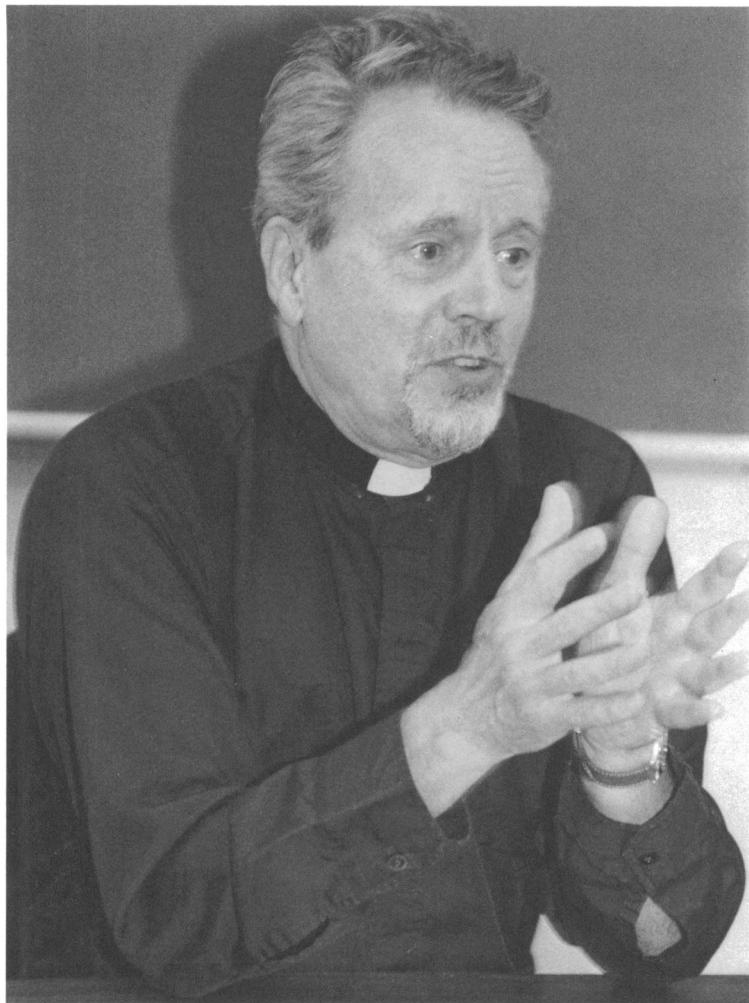


John Meyendorff

1926–1992

The death of Professor John Meyendorff on 22 July 1992 came as a shock to all; he was sixty-six years old. Death always comes “at a bad time,” but in the case of John Meyendorff, it was a particularly bad time for those who knew him as a scholar. Only three weeks before, he had retired as Dean of St. Vladimir’s Orthodox Theological Seminary in order to devote himself fully to scholarship and teaching. As his successor as Dean of the Seminary said so appropriately in his eulogy, “man proposes, God disposes.” So it was. Father John, as Professor Meyendorff preferred to be called in the traditional fashion for Eastern Orthodox clergy, had accepted the position of Dean at the major theological school of the Orthodox Church in America because, as he put it quite correctly, “There was really no one else.” He felt a duty to the Orthodox Christian community of the United States to preside over the passing of the torch to a new and American-born cohort of Orthodox scholars, thinkers, and leaders; they would be, in fact, his students.

Father John was a remarkable man. Byzantinists know him as a student of patristic theology and Byzantine church history. He was a preeminent contributor to the reevaluation of the thought of the fourteenth-century mystic thinker Gregory Palamas and to a new analysis of the role of hesychasm in the intellectual, cultural, and political life of the later empire. Slavists know him primarily for his work on the role of hesychast spirituality and the church in medieval Muscovy. Those interested in Orthodox theology know him as an exponent of a continuing organic Orthodox patristic tradition that could address modern problems. Ecumenists know him as an erudite spokesman for the Eastern Orthodox tradition, sure of his position yet no “sectarian,” genuinely interested in understanding the teachings of other churches. The faithful of the Orthodox church know him as the author of numerous books and articles explaining the Orthodox faith. Russians in emigration know him as an active member of the Russian Student Christian Movement and a contributor to its journal, someone who argued forcefully for the preservation of what was truly good in prerevolutionary Russia. Orthodox young people know him as one of the founders of the international Orthodox youth movement, Syndesmos, of which he later became General Secretary. His students at Fordham University, where he taught Byzantine history, and at St. Vladimir’s Seminary, where he taught patristics and church history, know him as a devoted teacher. Colleagues know him as a generous collaborator. Fellow clergy know him as a hard-working laborer in the vineyard. Many will remember him as a friend.



Born in France to a Russian emigré family descended from Baltic nobility (whence the unlikely Russian name Meyendorff), Father John grew up near Paris, attending French schools. He completed the course at L’Institut de Théologie Orthodoxe St.-Serge in Paris and, in 1958, was also awarded the degree Docteur-ès-Lettres by the Sorbonne. His thesis was a critical edition of the *Triads* (*La Défense des saints hésychastes*) of St. Gregory Palamas. Its publication in 1959 was a defining moment in the modern rediscovery of the man whom Meyendorff called the last father of the Byzantine church. Soon there followed a brilliant synthetic study of Palamas and fourteenth-century hesychasm, *Introduction à l’étude de Grégoire Palamas* (1959), written while he was affiliated with the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique and teaching at St.-Serge, his alma mater. Ordained a priest in the Orthodox church, Father John moved to the United States in 1959 to teach church history and then patristics at St. Vladimir’s Seminary in New York. For a time he simultaneously held the position of Lecturer in Byzantine Theology at Dumbarton Oaks, where he had earlier been a Junior Fellow. He would later be a Visiting Scholar there and would also serve on the advisory Senior Fellows committee and function as acting Director of Studies. He played a very active role in the intellectual life of Dumbarton Oaks, whether in residence or not, directing and participating in annual Byzantine symposia there, and researching and writing in the tranquil surroundings he so appreciated.

Father John quickly became an important figure in American Byzantine studies, participating in the Byzantine Studies Conference and serving on the Executive Committee of the U.S. National Committee for Byzantine Studies. He regularly played a major role in the International Congresses of Byzantine Studies, giving major papers or cogent *corapports*. He also devoted himself to church affairs, serving as a trusted adviser to the bishops of the Orthodox Church in America, Chair of its Department of External Affairs, representative to the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches and participant in its Faith and Order Commission, of which he was moderator from 1967 to 1975. He also edited a scholarly journal devoted to Orthodox thought, *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly*, and a monthly religious newspaper, *The Orthodox Church*. He was much in demand as a speaker at Orthodox and ecumenical events, as on college campuses and in parish pulpits. When the Soviet regime began to crumble in Russia, Father John became a regular visitor there, participating in the rebirth of a vital Orthodox theological scholarship by, as it were, returning to the homeland the intellectual tradition forced abroad after 1917 and nurtured there through dialogue with Western scholarship. Despite the extreme demands on his time, Father John still continued to do research and to write, particularly on his first love, patristic theology. His *Christ in Eastern Christian Thought* (1969) and *Byzantine Theology* (1973) confirmed his reputation as a scholar who could synthesize and clarify without oversimplification, a theologian who had mastered late antique philosophy and appreciated the intricacies of the ideas of the early Christian thinkers, and a historian who never lost sight of the larger picture of the evolution of the expression of Christian doctrine as a response to specific political and social conditions.

It was precisely the combination of professional historian and professional theologian that distinguished the man John Meyendorff and his work; he constantly treated the two fields as interrelated. The balance, of course, shifted, depending on the circum-

stances and the specific subject. His earliest studies of Palamism started very theologically, but broadened into a cultural history that illuminated fourteenth-century Byzantium. His more recent *Byzantium and the Rise of Russia* (1980) actually grew out of an attempt to study the role of hesychast monasticism among the Eastern Slavs, but soon evolved into a very political study of how the Byzantine Empire used the church in Rus' to bolster its complicated alliance system against the encroaching Ottoman Turks. Indeed, Meyendorff's most recent monograph, *Imperial Unity and Christian Divisions: The Church 450–680 A.D.* (1989), the first volume to appear in a collaborative series called "The Church in History," is a good example of balancing institutional, political, cultural, and intellectual history with theology in order to present "what actually happened." Although it is a history of worldwide Christianity, it is written from an Eastern perspective, unlike most modern histories of the Church, which are focused on Western Europe. Byzantinists will particularly appreciate this Byzantine outlook on church history. Historians of Western Christianity may see in it a desirable corrective to traditional ethnocentricity.

Scholarly reputation is normally determined by books written. On this basis, Father John's reputation as an important Byzantinist of the twentieth century is secure. But his shorter studies, too, offer very important insights into Byzantine history. (St. Vladimir's *Theological Quarterly* plans to publish a complete list of his publications in the near future.) His major articles on hesychasm collected in the volume, *Byzantine Hesychasm: Historical, Theological and Social Problems*, published by Variorum Press in 1974, are important for arguing specific points of his analysis of hesychasm and the question of fourteenth-century Byzantine humanism (as well as for creating a broader picture within which hesychast thought and the hesychast party has significance). But in Father John's case, scholars devoted to Byzantium should also look at the collections of what appear at first glance to be his popular religious writings. Collected into volumes with titles such as *Orthodoxy and Catholicity* (1966), *Marriage: An Orthodox Perspective* (1975), *Living Tradition* (1978), and *The Byzantine Legacy in the Orthodox Church* (1981), these essays addressed to a broader audience express a living witness to the Christian Church formed in the crucible of the Byzantine Empire and often a special, an existential, understanding of Byzantine tradition. To this devout Orthodox priest, Byzantine Christianity was not just an object of antiquarian or scholarly interest, but also the object of a very personal analysis of fundamental values and the forces that formed them. It is this specific charisma, that came from being an actual part of the spiritual life formulated in Byzantium, that made John Meyendorff's contribution to Byzantine studies so powerful and so *authentic* (a favorite word and a basic concept for Father John). For those who knew him personally, it is precisely this concept that distinguished him and his scholarship from many of his colleagues and their work: this somewhat shy, French-educated Russian who spent most of his adult life in America was authentic.

George P. Majeska